GO

by Brooks Kohler

"GO" written by Brooks Kohler in 2011. (Published by Brooks Kohler in 2025 for the purpose of adding the story to the Internet Archive.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are a coincidence.

Font used for the text of the story is Libre Baskerville:
https://fonts.google.com/specimen/Libre+Baskerville/about?query=libre+baskerville

The author released this story with a Creative Commons license:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/

A Rural Town

Why the hell are they mowing in April? I've been laid-off since November, gas is damn near five dollars a gallon, and it's 43 degrees with no sun today. Why the hell are they out there?

A wise man once told me to move away. He said, "Move away."

I was going on eighteen when I was told this, but I needed no coaxing. My parents were angry with me for getting Chelsea pregnant. She was only sixteen. The cops, at the request of her father, had tried to trump up some charges of statutory rape, but the judge told me to enlist in the military and forget it all. "It'll make a man out of you," said, the judge, "and if you don't go, you'll get six months in the pen."

To me, it was extortion plain and simple, but to my parents and our neighbor, Mr. Samuels, it was a way out of a bad situation. "What choice do

you have, Roy?" asked Mr. Samuels. "You don't go into the military, your screwed, but on a bright side, if you stay, you're screwed. Just look at me." I did, every night, but not with my eyes but my ears. Mr. Samuels was retired from the postal service. Something had happened to his pension, and he was angry. He moped all over town begrudging those in power, and every night, he would sit on his porch sipping one beer after another while listening to Merle Haggard, and cursing the state, the governor, and anything else he could think of. "I voted Democrat!" he would shout. "I sold my vote to those bastards at the capitol, and look what they've done!"

My father always had a comment each time Mr. Samuels yelled something out. "Here that?" he would ask. "That is the sound of a man who is hurting. Don't be that man."

I took that advice to heart. I never wanted to be that man, but damn my luck was bad. Though, I tried not to, I became that man. The army rejected me when I failed to pass a urine test. I was stunned.

The doctor, a smoker faced guy with silver eyes and matching hair, walked up to me and looked me dead in the face. “You smoke pot?” he asked.

“No.”

“Bullshit.”

He handed me the cup containing my urine sample. It was still warm but had changed from bright yellow to a burning red. “See this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“That color means you’ve tested positive for cannabis. Can you defend yourself?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Maybe will get you killed son. See this?” He pointed to his eye. I looked deeply into it and saw my worried reflection. “It’s fake!
Just like your pathetic excuse.”

The next thing I knew I was standing back before the judge. This time, his kind words were removed by swift action. Soon I found myself heading to a work farm in the middle of the state, a place for young men who needed a lesson in the ways of life and how to defend themselves from

prison sodomy, which I did but not without paying a terrible price.

Fresh off the bus, I got into a fight. It happened my first day. I was standing in a line waiting to get my clothes. I was standing there, nervously minding my own business, along with a dozen other guys who were trying to do the same, and a prisoner, a short, fat Mexican looking guy who was working as a helper said, “The bucks are going to love you. Them niggers love fresh white meat.”

“Are you talking to me?” I asked.

He nodded and blew me a kiss while batting his eye lashes, and that was all it took. I swung, not out of anger but fear. I had been told by a guy named Gerry, who had done some time in the state pen, to fight every chance I could get. “You’ll have to fight for your life,” said Gerry. “If you don’t, you’ll get used, extorted, and if your not careful, punked out.”

With this in mind, my fist connected to the Mexican guy’s left temple. He hit the ground and

immediately covered his face.

"Get up," I said.

"No!"

He began to scream. All the guys in the line were cheering. A guard came along and popped me in the shin with his nightstick. It hurt like hell, and that defensive tactic got me respect but not without first getting me thrown into solitary for two weeks. When I got out, I was placed on a special work detail that was in charge of picking of dead animals on the side of the highway. It was awful. Myself and two other guys had the job. We started at six in the morning and worked straight till four picking up anything that was too foul to be seen by passing motorists. To make matters worse, it was the middle of summer. The humidity was at its peak, and the days were long. My first week I got sunburned so bad that I threw up. The second week, I peeled so bad, I could feel my flesh slipping off my body. I felt like a snake, and because of that earned the nickname, "Snake Boy." I got this name from a black guy who worked the roads with me. His name

was Ronnie. He was from a poor town where everybody worked for cash upfront because there were no jobs. He was in the system for selling drugs and punching a cop, but his mother, who was somebody important on a special board, had gotten the judge to take leniency on him. So, instead of getting serious jail time, a year or more, like he should have, he got eight months and the road crew. Ronnie often joked about it.

"Shit," he would say. "Damn, lawyer didn't do this. My mom's did this! She's got my back, she and Jesus."

When he would say this, he would finish by pointing up to the sky and me, like a curious fool, I would follow his finger up and spend a few seconds pondering whatever was up there. Once I got wrapped up in watching a shimmering jet vanish into a cloud, and the guard on duty shouted at me. I hated that guard for that and wanted to knock him up beside his head, but I let it slide and continued on.

There was another guy on the road crew, a

tall, skinny kid who had just turned eighteen. He was in for the same thing I was, sleeping with a minor. He had freckles all over his face, and his hair was bright red. Oddly enough, and contrary to all I had heard about redheads, he never burned. In fact, he never did anything. He would work half the day, going on about how hot it was, stripping off his shirt and complaining, and then, when something really disgusting needed scraping up off the road, like a deer that had been disemboweled from a head on collision with a semi, he would pretend he was sick and back away.

"Oh, no," he would say. "I'm getting dizzy."

"The hell you are!" I would shout, with Ronnie backing me up me up with a nod.

"No, I'm really am serious," he would continue by covering his mouth. "I'm sick!"

He did this so often and so much, that I plead with a guard to replace him, but a cold shoulder was all I got. The guard told me to return to my job, and freckle face got a drink of water and a chance to sit in the shade while Ronnie and I scooped up rotting

carcasses. It was not until close to being released that I learned that the skinny kid's father worked at the camp, and out of all the things I had heard or seen while in that place, it was by far the most disturbing. To imagine seeing your own son locked up, and worse, being asked to guard him and punish him like all the others.

That's been years ago, and still I wonder why he did that, but what I really want to know is why the hell are they mowing in April? The grass is not even up yet. The days are still cool, and the nights are too dry. It is as if there is some conspiracy to all start mowing at the same time, and my neighbor, Mr. Chester is the brains behind it all. He always starts first, and then my other neighbor, Mr. Max, a nickname for sure, joins in.

Like everyone around me, Mr. Chester and Mr. Max are retired. Mr. Chester worked for a company that made chimneys for big factories. Mr. Max worked for the state prison system. When they learned I had been in the work camp all hell broke loose. Mr. Max came over to my house and called

me out.

"You been in jail?" he asked.

"Jail?"

"Yeah, prison. Someone said you were in prison? Where were you?"

"Who said this?" I asked. "I was in that camp they got up there for retards and rejects, but that's a long time ago now."

"Ain't long to me," said Mr. Max. "I got grandchildren around here."

"Okay, so," I replied.

"Well, I don't want them to be hurt in anyway."

"Hurt?" I questioned. "Who's going to hurt them?"

"Maybe you," he said.

"Me?"

"Yeah. You're not one of those perverts I see on the news that screws little kids are ya? They got that show where that guy goes around and looks for those bastards."

"No!" I shouted. "Hell no!" But then I thought,

Does a sixteen year old count?

"I did a search for you," continued Mr. Max, interrupting my thought. "You're not on the list."

"What list?"

"The list," he shouted, "the one they put you on if you screw little kids!"

"Well, why should I be?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, very gruff, "I don't know. Maybe you should be. Maybe you didn't report. Hell, I don't know! It's a habit I guess to look for those sort of things."

"Well, don't look here!" I said, raising my voice. "I don't have one thing to hide, and you and them, and the whole damn town, and world for that fact, can get straight to hell if they say I do! I make a good living driving a truck. I work hard and don't have to apologize to you for one damn thing!"

"Can you own a gun?" he asked.

"A gun?"

"Yes, the true test of a criminal is if they can own a gun."

"How the hell is that a test?" I asked, pleading.

“If you were a criminal you‟d have one anyway!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, waving his hands and walking away, “but I’ve got my eye on you.”

That Max. What a bastard.

His son works at a local car dealership. They jack up the prices on everything because people have nowhere else to go, but Max is okay with it. Every year he gets a new pickup. Last year it was a yellow one. The other day he brought home a red one. He spent all of last Tuesday driving it up and down the street, blowing the horn and showing it off. You would have thought it was a parade. He even stopped a few times to talk to people who got caught up in his plan to brag. At the time, I was trying to take a nap. I had just got in from working all night laying carpet at a new motel. Though, I had no clue what I was doing, my friend was running the job. All he needed was a strong back and a guy willing to be paid off the books. I agreed. My unemployment was safe, but I was tired, beat, and wired from too much coffee. Added to this, I could hear Max’s booming voice from all the way in

the bedroom. So, I got up, made some more coffee and walked out to the front porch. There he was, leaning against the door, clinching a can of beer, and pointing out this and that about his new truck.

"The seats get warm," I heard him say. "No more cold butt for me in the winter. No sir! This bad boy has it all."

The person listening just nodded. Max took a sip of beer, but I laughed and shook my head. I wanted to yell out, "Hey! There's a law in this town about drinking and driving!" But, I did not. It would have been a mistake. Max's daughter's husband was a local deputy. Max would have had the law come and check me out. He was like that. He had done it before, not to me, but to a black guy named Leroy Sum.

Leroy used to live two houses down from me. He was poor, dirt poor, and was kept poor because nobody would hire a nigger in a town full of wetbacks and crackers. So, he went all over town doing odd jobs, mainly mowing yards and painting. This is what got him into trouble.

Late last year in August, a storm hit the town. Winds were clocked at close to 80 m.p.h., and a lot of damage was done. Tree limbs landed on cars. Shingles were ripped off roofs. Mr. Chester had a tree fall in his front yard and wanted it removed, but the city refused to do it because it was on his property, and the bastards at the insurance firm he worked with said it was not an act of God cause of something to do with bad roots and the tree should have already been removed. This made Mr. Chester steaming mad. I heard him cussing so loud that even the sea dogs from lore stood up and shed a tear. It was great. I laughed and laughed. He stomped all over the place, huffing and puffing, and finally slammed down on my porch.

"I got a chainsaw," he said. "Can you cut up that damn tree?"

"Nope. I only got a few hours until I have to be on the road, but call Leroy. He'll do it."

Mr. Chester tromped off. I went about my business. It was not until I returned home four days later that I learned the news. Leroy was in the

county detention center. Mr. Max told me.

"That damn nigger is where he ought to be," he said, slamming his foot down hard on the first step leading to my home.

"What nigger? Who are you talking about? Speak wisely or leave my house!"

"Leroy Sum!" he shouted.

"Leroy?" I questioned. "What the hell did he do?"

"He walked off with something that didn't belong to him. That's what he did."

I could not believe it. Mr. Max had to be lying, but I checked with Mr. Chester, and it was true. Leroy had been arrested for stealing his chainsaw, and worse, he had no money for bail. So, I got in my car, drove down, and bailed him out. It cost five hundred dollars, half-a-week's paycheck, but I managed to do it. Leroy simply cried in my arms. He was such a fragile man. It made me mad. I wanted to kick the shit out of the sheriff and Mr. Max's daughter's husband for locking up such a sweet, kind soul.

"What happened, Leroy?" I asked. "Did you do it?"

"What do you think?" he asked, sobbing. "Of course I didn't. I went home to get some gas, fell asleep on the couch, and the next thing I know the cops are all over the damn place. It was an accident, Roy. I swear it was."

"I believe you," I said, and I did.

His eyes were so pink and red that my heart wanted to shatter. I knew what it was like to be viewed as the world's worst criminal. Nobody backs you. Nobody cares. Nobody can see themselves in that spot. They just push off and get as far away from you as they possibly can in the hopes that their unpunished crimes do not get mixed up with yours.

"Get in," I said, opening the car door. "I'll drive you home."

After dropping Leroy off, I went to visit Mr. Chester. Mr. Max was already there. He had been told by his daughter's husband that I had bailed out Leroy.

"Why did you bail him out?" he asked.

"Because, he had no money," I replied.

"He's a thief!" shouted Mr. Max.

"Yeah, about that," I said. "He fell asleep on the couch."

"He's a thief, nonetheless."

"And, he was not meaning to steal it," I continued.

"Don't listen to him," interrupted Mr. Max. "I seen this shit in the joint. Convicts always back other convicts."

It took everything I had to bite my tongue, but I pressed on, "So, if you could Mr. Chester, please drop the charges."

"Drop the charges!?" exclaimed Mr. Max. "Are you out of your mind? That crazy bastard does work all over town. Who knows what else he has stolen? He leaned in all confident and said, "You know, I bet he's the one who broke into the tavern."

"You can't prove that," I said.

"Watch me," said Mr. Max. "Just watch me. I'll not only prove it, but I'll see that nigger hang for it."

He made one of those stupid, scrunched up faces that people do when they want to see action. I looked at Mr. Chester. Like a coward, he lowered his head. It was pathetic.

"Well, you've not heard the last of this," I said. "You can't just railroad a guy because you want to."

"Wanna bet?"

Mr. Max smiled. I could tell he would not rest until Leroy was selectively punished. Angrily, I left. I marched straight home, grabbed a six pack from the fridge, and went to Leroy's place. There, in the quiet comfort of his living room, we had the best talk. He talked about his family, the one he never saw in Memphis, and his brother who owned a farm in Iowa. He made mention of a daughter in New Jersey and a grandchild he longed to see. We talked and talked. I left at midnight. He left come dawn. Nobody has seen him since. He was a good soul and good saint. I miss him. I figure if he were still here, he would be asking the same question. Why the hell are they mowing in April? And, I'm sure I would get an answer.

That's what people with too much money and time do, Roy. They make work for themselves so they look important, and poor old bastards like us, are made to look poorer and poorer because we ain't got shit to do.

Yeah, that's what I imagine he would say.

THE END